German and international crisis management in the Sahel: why discussions about Sahel policy are going around in circles

Tull, Denis M.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Tull, D. . M. (2020). *German and international crisis management in the Sahel: why discussions about Sahel policy are going around in circles.* (SWP Comment, 27/2020). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. https://doi.org/10.18449/2020C27

SWP Comment
NO. 27 JUNE 2020

German and International Crisis Management in the Sahel

Why Discussions about Sahel Policy Are Going around in Circles

Denis M. Tull

In May, Germany's parliament approved the country's continued military participation in two missions in Mali and the Sahel. As part of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA) and the EU Training Mission EUTM Mali, up to 1,550 German soldiers can be deployed. Given the scale of these engagements, which are currently Germany's largest, German discussions on Sahel policy, like those elsewhere, have been sluggish and unproductive. One reason for this is that buzzwords and false certainties determine the debate, which is largely detached from strategic considerations.

One of the unquestioned premises from which debate on the Sahel often proceeds is its analogy and comparability with Afghanistan. What would seem more productive, however, is to apply the lessons from the engagement in Afghanistan to the intervention in the Sahel in order to be more effective. This requires a discussion that goes beyond the exchange of tropes and buzzwords.

France: Partner or Leader?

In Germany, no discussion on the Sahel is complete without reference to France. This is only to be expected, since France is not only Germany's closest partner, but it can also claim European and international leadership on the Sahel. However, pointing to France becomes problematic when, on the German side, presumptions about French Sahel policy affect and constrain the shaping of its own policy toward the region.

On the one hand, there are those in Germany who want to cooperate with France in Mali for bilateral reasons, in support of European integration, or because they consider the Sahel important. Generally speaking, these voices have a tendency to readily accept French leadership in the Sahel or to recognize France as the framework nation. This is usually justified by France's incomparably higher level of involvement and its supposedly superior knowledge of the region. Others regard cooperation with France as inevitable but see a need for Berlin to distinguish itself somewhat from Paris. They cultivate a diffuse, persistent distrust of French policy toward Africa or

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

consider it to be dominated by the military, and therefore misguided.

It is undeniable that European and international involvement in the Sahel is inconceivable without a major French footprint. By implication, Berlin should take a critical look at French policy, but without perpetuating those clichés and myths that sweepingly portray French policy in the Sahel as driven by dubious and self-interested motives. At least the last two French military interventions — in Mali and the Central African Republic (both in 2013) — cannot be interpreted in this way. Paris intervened reluctantly in both cases, in Mali at the request of the government in Bamako and to the applause of the Malian population and neighboring states.

Where there is dissent, Germany should bring it forward, more strongly than before. This is all the easier because many other European countries are also involved in the Sahel today. There is no compelling reason to take for granted that France could or should define European and international engagement in the Sahel. France is certainly conscious and protective of its power and influence there. Politicians in France also have a tendency to consider Europe as a platform for French leadership. Nevertheless, the problem not only lies in Paris. European partners, as well as the United States, place high expectations on France as regards initiative and leadership. Thus, French dominance of Sahel policy becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Whether this is conducive to the success of international stabilization efforts is doubtful, given France's increasingly precarious political legitimacy in the Sahel. As a result, it should not be in France's, Germany's, or Europe's interest that Paris always be at the forefront, both in terms of policy and visibility.

This, of course, presupposes that Germany and other European states not only reject French proposals, but that they themselves take the initiative by suggesting common positions and strategies. As seen from Paris, Berlin often slows down the French drive for action without proposing viable alternatives. Here, Paris and Berlin are going round in circles.

A recurring disagreement concerns, for example, the use of force. If Germany and others decline to participate in the robust mentoring mission of the French-initiated Task Force Takuba, this is not only due to risk aversion, as many in Paris suspect. It is also because of the idea in Berlin that more military deployments, and more force, will not necessarily produce better results. In this regard, the German attitude is informed by 21 years of (ongoing) military deployments in Afghanistan. Here, differences in strategic culture and a lack of mutual comprehension become apparent and nurture frustrations on both sides.

The Use of Force: Too Much, Too Little, or Counterproductive?

A significant aspect in the discussion on stabilization strategies in Mali and the Sahel is the appropriate use of coercive means. One argument repeatedly put forward by decision-makers, military officers, and commentators is that conflicts in the Sahel cannot be resolved exclusively by military means. But what does this mean? It is of little help to juxtapose the military with development cooperation, not to mention that the latter struggles in zones of armed conflict. On the face of it, the omnipresent reference in German and EU discourse to "networked" or "integrated" approaches seems to be more suitable. But where and how the various dimensions of such an approach converge, and whether they are more than the sum of their parts, is not readily apparent. After all, such an approach has been pursued in Mali since 2013, as German and EU officials are keen to stress, and at great expense. Whatever the reasons for this, the fact that security, political, and social trends in the region are overwhelmingly negative indicates that the approach has not yet been effective.

A second common point in the German debate is the view that international policy toward the Sahel relies excessively on mili-

tary means, which is said to be counterproductive. There is some truth in the alleged primacy of the military. The use of force can be implemented in a more targeted manner and promises more immediate effects than the pursuit of difficult and overriding goals such as resolving conflicts, rebuilding state institutions, and promoting development. Here, military action becomes a substitute for politics and policy. However, the idea that the primacy of the military applies without restriction must be put into perspective.

To a certain degree, the impression of military primacy is created by the inordinate amount of attention that Sahel observers and the media pay to Operation Barkhane, and to a lesser extent the Joint Force of the G5 countries. However, given the vast area of operations and the proportion of soldiers actually engaged in combat operations (around 2,600 out of 5,100 for Barkhane), the alleged military footprint becomes lighter, even more so when considering the small sizes of the military forces in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. MINUSMA's force, albeit with more than 12,000 troops, is to a large extent involved in protecting the mission and enabling the work of its civilian components. Indeed, a long-standing Malian complaint has been that MINUSMA is not sufficiently robust. Finally, the limited response that France's Takuba initiative has received from European partners is an indication that the primacy of the military is less straightforward than is often claimed.

As divergent as both perspectives are, they are not conducive to a productive discussion on policy about the Sahel. At best, they help to shift responsibility: The idea that coercive means are insufficient on their own absolves the military because they cannot solve the conflict. Moreover, the idea on the excessive weight of the military, for its part, relieves civilian actors of responsibility, because it leads to the conclusion that the primacy of the military leaves no room for civilian and political efforts.

Instead, the focus of the debate should be re-directed toward the strategic goals that can be achieved by military means. Decision-makers must ask themselves how the tactical goals of counterterrorism are related to the strategic goal of stabilizing Mali under local authority. If counterterrorism is regarded as indispensable for Mali's stabilization, then the objectives to be achieved must be specified, i.e., the point at which counterterrorism could be considered successful — or successful enough (and completed). It is doubtful whether benchmarks can be defined for this. However, if this is not possible, the opposite conclusion is that the military-led counterterrorism mission would have no end in sight. All of this suggests the necessity for a political and strategic debate about the significance of terrorism as an obstacle to the stabilization of Mali and the Sahel. Closely related, it seems indispensable to revive the debate about the conditions under which one may hope that Malian partners will be able to take responsibility for stabilization, and what foreign partners may need to do to help them obtain that goal. Among other things, this concerns the mandate of EUTM Mali.

Also conceivable is a shift in emphasis toward a stronger focus on civilian security forces, the judiciary, and law enforcement agencies. They might be better suited for maintaining law and order than thinly spread and often static military forces, which also have a disturbing human rights record. A debate should be held on this in the EU. Of course, it promises to be controversial because France advocates the continuum of security and defense — a concept that other Europeans are deeply uncomfortable with.

Governance: The Call for Better Government

The governments of the states in the Sahel are the focus of much attention. Foreign partners are demanding more ownership, more commitment to reform, and more effective policy-making — in short, better governance. The governance concept is based on a functionalist understanding of

politics. It expresses the expectation that the governments in the Sahel should organize public goods such as security, infrastructure, and education. But this assumption all too often proves to be an empty formula that ignores local politics, i.e., the conflicts that shape the possibilities and modalities of government.

Outsiders looking for explanations of "bad governance" usually revert to two propositions: Local actors lack the political will to engage in appropriate governance, or they lack the requisite capacities to do so.

The assertion that there is a lack of political will, which is often associated with corruption and clientelism, frequently leads to appeals that outsiders should increase pressure on local actors to change their behavior. In Mali, for example, a typical example concerns the outside pressure put on the government and northern rebels to implement the faltering peace accord that they signed in 2005. In exceptional cases, external support is tied to changes in the behavior of local actors (conditionalities). However, political elites in Mali and the Sahel are well-aware of European anxieties about migration and terrorism coming out of the region. They therefore tend to not take conditionalities very seriously. They know that they have leverage (and time) and make a virtue of their external dependence, because crises and conflicts bring considerable material and financial aid into the country. The example of Mali — where the international community is trying in vain to push for the implementation of a peace agreement using a wide and growing range of instruments to exert pressure (including UN sanctions) — is evidence of an asymmetry of power, and thus of the limits of external influence.

External aid is often not attached to conditionalities, because the problem of "bad governance" is blamed on the lack of local capacities. The capacity-building approach has spread to all sectors and areas (army reconstruction, combating corruption, the work of parliaments, development cooperation, etc.). It is the ubiquitous response to the call for better governance. Often, however, these programs and projects do not lead to enhanced capacity, but rather to increased dependence. Frequently, this is compatible with — or in the interest of — local elites who delegate tasks that are assumed to be the responsibility of the state to outside actors. As a result, the goal of greater local responsibility and ownership moves even further away.

Calls for better governance do not mean much. More important would be a discussion of strategies and instruments that may be able to address the problems and dilemmas outlined above. These include the apparent paradox that the situation in the Sahel is steadily deteriorating *despite* the fact that the international community has enlarged and deepened its footprint. It is fair to say that interveners have barely changed their course of action over the past couple of years, beyond minor adjustments. Their reasoning always seems to be that their involvement in the Sahel must be extended and intensified. The less the situation resembles their objectives, the more that needs to be done. In order to make progress on ideas of local ownership and responsibility, however, an alternative strategy should at least be conceivable. This does not necessarily mean an abrupt withdrawal, but it does mean addressing the indirect and unintended consequences that external actors have on the strategies and behavior of local protagonists. Such factors should be given greater consideration in current discussions, because there is little to suggest today that the Sahel intervention will be a short one.

Dr. Denis M. Tull, Senior Associate in the Middle East and Africa Division at SWP, is currently working as a researcher at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) in Paris.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3—4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN 1861-1761
doi: 10.18449/2020C27

(English version of SWP-Aktuell 43/2020)